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CHINA: Weibo and advancing freedom of religion or belief

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Popular Chinese microblog Weibo has been used by people to express religious beliefs and to voice criticisms, for example of some local government actions. Indeed, the government may be using Weibo to monitor the behaviour of local authorities. Freedom of religion or belief has been a popular topic, Forum 18 News Service notes, as seen in discussions about connections between the Constitution and religious freedom. A Peking University scholar wrote: "Without religious freedom, there can't be a real Constitution!" But there seem to be different levels of interest in discussing religious freedom from Weibo users of different beliefs. And criticisms of the state, especially of central political leaders, are limited and indirect. There is no indication that Weibo has been used to mobilise collective action to address specific religious freedom violations. But there is a freedom to express beliefs on Weibo that would have been unthinkable in China not very long ago.

The popular Chinese microblog Weibo has served as an effective means for individual religious adherents to express beliefs and to voice criticisms about phenomena concerning religion. It has also served as a platform for news about freedom of religion or belief violations. However, Weibo's limitations are evident in that criticisms of the state, especially of the central political leaders, are limited and can only be indirect. Moreover, there is no indication that it has been able to mobilise effective collective action to address specific cases. So Weibo has yet to demonstrate an ability to be used to effectively protect religious freedom.

Chinese microblogging

Since being founded in 2009, Weibo, a microblog that has elements of Twitter and Facebook, has become one of the most popular Internet platforms in China. According to the 30th Survey Report of the China Internet Network Information Center of 28 September 2012, as of June 2012 there were 538 million Chinese Internet users. In October 2012, the Singapore-based China Internet Watch reported that China's Data Center of China's Internet (DCCI) indicated that nearly 90 percent of China's Internet users are Weibo users. This means that the number of Weibo users, at approximately 450 million, is more than the entire population of the United States and is almost equal to the population of the European Union.

Weibo is the generic Chinese term for microblogging. There are several Weibo providers. Sina Weibo is the best-known provider and is the one that most Chinese think of when referring generally to Weibo. However, according to Steven Millward, a Shanghai-based social media expert, Tencent Weibo has the largest number of registered users with 469 million as of June 2012. Sina Weibo has approximately 370 million registered users and over 36 million average daily active users. Netease Weibo is third, with over 260 million registered users.

Internet censorship

China has long imposed censorship on the Internet, including of foreign-based websites. Foreign sites which have been blocked include those related to the persecution of Christians and other religious faiths, the Dalai Lama, the Falun Gong religious movement, the Muslim Uygurs of Xinjiang and a number of Catholic sites (see F18News 21 July 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=366). Most such sites remain blocked today.

Chinese search engines prevent searches for sensitive terms, including religious freedom-related terms such as "Falun Gong" and "Dalai Lama", or provide only links to state-sponsored sites proving the government's view.

However, the growth of the Internet, including more Chinese-based websites, the spread of new platforms – such as Weibo - and tools, including proxies, have made such censorship more difficult.

Weibo and state-society relations

According to Professors Guobin Yang and Craig Calhoun of the University of Pennsylvania and New York University, respectively, Weibo has displayed even faster speed, greater reach, and more interactivity than other Internet vehicles, such as websites used by Chinese environmental activists to oppose the building of dams on the Nu River in south-western China. As a result, Weibo has accumulated many achievements during its short period of existence.

For example, in July 2011, two high-speed trains collided outside Wenzhou, in the eastern coastal province of Zhejiang. News of the collision – which led to 40 deaths and injuries to 191 people - was immediately posted on Weibo. Tens of millions of users posted and re-posted information about the collision while engaging in discussions. According to a 28 July 2011 New York Times report, when Weibo exposed the local government officials' directive to lawyers that the latter should not accept cases from the families of victims without the former's approval, the local government immediately withdrew the order and apologised. According to the same New York Times report, when Weibo users discovered and criticised the local government's decision to bury the first train to cover up the incident, local officials quickly unearthed the train and sent it for analysis.

But despite Weibo's achievements, no one should deny the presence of the state. As stated by a China-based American with the alias Martin Johnson who founded two websites, Greatfire.org and Freeweibo.com, which monitor Internet censorship in China: "The reason why Weibo exists is because the [Communist Party of China] allowed it to." Indeed, the communist state has incentives to support Weibo. As Reuters noted in a 31 October 2012 report, industry executives in China indicated that the government can use Weibo to obtain "real-time feedback on policies and a method to take stock of the public mood." The same report quoted Michael Anti, a Chinese blogger and journalist, as noting that the Chinese central authorities can use Weibo to take action against local officials and rival factions. According to Anti, if Weibo "is a battlefield .. the government seeks to occupy it, not destroy it."

So Weibo may become a vehicle for political change in China - or serve as a means by which the Communist Party remains in power. The verdict is still out on which side will eventually win the day.

Weibo and freedom of religion or belief

Religion and religion-related topics are popular topics on Weibo sites. Based on a review of Sina Weibo from mid-October 2012 to early November 2012, Forum 18 has found that Buddhism has by far been the most popular religion mentioned. A large number of Weibo users engaged in discussions and postings about Buddhist-related topics, even potentially sensitive ones.

For example, the controversy surrounding the stock listing of sacred Buddhist sites (see F18News 12 September 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1741) elicited much discussion on the platform. In particular, news that a Vice President of the state-approved Buddhist Association of China had criticised the planned stock listings was posted and discussed.

According to Christians in China, an English-language website written by people inside and outside China, Christianity "is thriving on the fastest-growing and most powerful .. media platform ever seen in history". The author of one article on the site, "Christianity on China's Microblog", noted that prominent Chinese Christians, including those from Taiwan, have used Weibo to publicise their faith and have attracted large followings. For example, Pan Shiyi, a real estate tycoon who is a Christian, has six million followers on Weibo, while an unnamed Taiwan actor and his wife, both Christians, have four million followers.

Many of the Weibo postings on religion are self-expressions of personal faith. For example, one active Muslim Weibo user is a female university student, who regularly posts personal declarations of faith. In a similar vein, on 3 November, a Catholic user posted the following statement: "Thank God that I was born in a Catholic family with devout Catholic parents.."

"Without religious freedom, there can't be a real Constitution!"

The topic of religious freedom has been very popular on Weibo. Since April 2012, users have engaged in discussions about the connection between the state Constitution and religious freedom. A scholar from Peking University in the capital Beijing wrote: "Without religious freedom, there can't be a real Constitution!"

Other users have also criticised the current state of freedom of religion or belief in China, either explicitly or implicitly identifying the government as being responsible for the problems. "In foreign countries, including Taiwan, there are Bibles or Buddhist sutras in the hotel room," a user wrote on 1 November. "That is religious freedom!" On 2 November, a user responded to a posted news item that the authorities in the Tibetan Autonomous Region would provide accident insurance to Tibetan Buddhist monks and nuns with this comment: "The Tibetan people said: What's given to them is not what they wanted; all they want is religious freedom."

A news report was posted on Weibo about the public announcement by Shanghai's newly-ordained auxiliary Bishop, Ma Daquin, that he would resign from his post in the state-approved Catholic association immediately after his ordination. Bishop Ma's announcement resulted in the state's decision to close indefinitely the Catholic seminary with which he is affiliated. On 2 November, one Weibo user responded with this posted comment: "In fulfilling its earthly obligation to obey Caesar, the Christian shepherds and their lamb must not contradict the basic nature of the church. A regime that deprives a religious organisation of autonomy, and attacks and divides religious workers through personal threats and bribes is not qualified to say that the country under its rule has realised the separation of state and religion, and religious freedom."

There seem to be clear indications of different levels of interest in discussing religious freedom from Weibo users of different religions. For example, the number of postings about religious freedom as it applies to Protestant Christianity and Catholicism is significantly greater than the number for other religions. Some space is allowed on Weibo for discussions on religious freedom in

Tibet and Xinjiang, but the number of posts is significantly fewer than for posts dealing with freedom of religion or belief as it affects Christian churches. Likewise, posts are few on topics connecting religious freedom and Buddhism or Daoism, which may reflect the general Chinese perception that religious freedom is not a problem for those religions.

References to the term "religious persecution" can also be found on Weibo. However, such references generally occur in the context of discussing Western history. Based on an admittedly short timescale snapshot of activity on Weibo, Forum 18 did not note references to this term in the context of contemporary Chinese politics.

Weibo and promoting freedom of religion or belief

Based on the available information, including a snapshot of the activities on Weibo, it seems that individuals enjoy considerable space to discuss religion-related topics on Weibo. Followers of religions have used it as a platform for declarations of faith. In this sense, Weibo has become a vehicle for interested parties to promote their religion and its virtues. At the same time, Weibo also permits overtly non-religious users to post criticisms about religion. This could be significant, as the state currently generally refrains from criticising religion due to concerns that anti-religious rhetoric might promote social instability.

That religious freedom has been such a prominent discussion topic is also interesting. As suggested earlier, the state may be allowing such discussion because it wants to get a sense of the "public mood" on this sensitive political topic. That postings about religious freedom violations involving local Protestant Christian groups have been allowed suggests that the central government may be using Weibo to monitor the behaviour of local authorities, which have been the primary violators of religious freedom. This may indeed serve as an incentive for the state to maintain Weibo. On this note, Weibo continues to include postings about the situation of Beijing's Shouwang Church, which garnered international attention when it was not permitted to worship in the building it has purchased. However, it should be noted that the latest postings about the church were dated October 2012.

Nonetheless, Weibo has limitations. First, discussion of religious freedom has involved mainly scholars and intellectuals, which suggests that it is not yet an issue with broad mass appeal in China. Second, while religious freedom violations are points of discussion, Weibo's potential to mobilise people to defend religious freedom has not been used. The postings about religious freedom violations that Forum 18 has observed have been individual expressions of indignation about the violations, or support for the victims of those violations. No posting seen by Forum 18 has called for collective action.

This observation matches observations made by others about the Internet's limitations in China. Gary King, a professor of political science at Harvard University, and his two doctoral students, had conducted a survey entitled "How Censorship in China Allows Government Criticism but Silences Collective Expression," which involved over 1,000 Chinese websites. The survey was conducted in the first half of 2011. King and his associates concluded that Chinese Internet censors have generally targeted postings that call for social mobilisation.

In addition, religious topics that are deemed sensitive, such as Falun Gong, which has been banned by the state, cannot be found on Weibo. When Forum 18 searches for the term "Falun Gong" on Weibo the entire website shuts down on the computer, even though Forum 18 is allowed to return to Weibo through a different webpage. Interestingly, the term "Dalai Lama" can be found on Weibo, but the context is invariably historical and theoretical.

Forum 18 is not able to determine how quickly postings are deleted. However, according to experts, censorship can take place either immediately or several months. For example, according to Chi-Chu Tschang, a MBA student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who carried out a project on Weibo in May 2012: "The fastest a post was deleted on Sina Weibo was just over 4 minutes. The longest time it took for the censor to get around to deleting a message on Sina Weibo was over four months."

Censorship appears to be one of the few forms of "punishment" levelled against violators of the unspoken rules. As described above, another form of punishment is either the appearance of an error page or the blanking of the page altogether. Tschang also observed that Weibo administrators have issued notices to violators that their postings would be deleted. Sina Weibo has also indicated that repeat offenders could be prevented from posting new materials for up to 48 hours and, in some cases, even have their accounts cancelled.

However, Forum 18 is not aware of additional punitive measures, including personal interrogation, physical harassment, or arrest, in connection with religious freedom discussions on Weibo. Nonetheless, there are reports suggesting that posting negative stories on the Internet can result in arrests for the poster, as indicated in a 23 November 2012 report by the New York Times about the arrest and detention of a former journalist in the south-western province of Guizhou.

Both foreign residents and local Chinese residents are allowed to post information on Weibo. In December 2011, the Chinese authorities issued regulations that required all Weibo account holders to disclose their real names when registering to use the platform. However, Sina Weibo revealed in its filings with the US Securities and Exchange Commission that it has not always complied with this regulation "for reasons including existing user behaviour, the nature of the microblogging product and the lack of clarity on specific implementation procedures.." Other than this requirement, no documentation appears to be necessary. Forum 18, for example, was able to register a Sina Weibo account without providing any identity documentation.

The relatively light punishments certainly should not act as a permanent deterrent to anyone wishing to post sensitive comments. In this sense, it may be that postings on Weibo can be far more "politically incorrect" than writings on printed media, including newspapers, magazines and books. Yet, it is also telling that there do not seem to be many postings that fall into clearly taboo areas.

For example, criticisms of the central leadership have not been observed on Weibo, even though criticisms of local authorities can easily be found. Internet users in China are not allowed to criticise the country's top political leaders. As Reuters suggested on 31 October, this may reflect the fact that censorship rules are formulated at the central government level with little input from local authorities. Therefore, censors tend to concentrate on postings that make specific references to central political leaders. However, we cannot rule out the possibility that Weibo users, especially Chinese residents, have adopted some form of self-censorship.

It appears that Weibo is advancing religious freedom in China to some extent. But it is not yet (if it ever will be) an effective means for people to mobilise to actively defend their rights to freedom of religion or belief. For now, Chinese Weibo users will have to be content with the ability to express their religious or non-religious beliefs publicly, which would have been unthinkable in China not very long ago. (END)

For analyses of other aspects of religious freedom in China, see <http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=3>.

A printer-friendly map of China is available from <http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=China>.

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